

Thank you, Madame Chair, for the opportunity to address the committee today.

My name is Teresa Marhofer and I am the President-Elect of the Michigan Parent Teacher Association, or PTA. I am a resident of Mulliken, MI, in Representative Shaughnessy's district, and I am the proud parent of a recent high school graduate.

The expansion of the Education Achievement Authority of Michigan presents both potential and challenges. Michigan PTA shares the desire to see our state's struggling schools improved. However, we have strong concerns regarding the transparency and accountability around the EAA, and the academic progress of its students.

The research is clear: schools perform better when they benefit from robust community engagement and family-school partnerships. The work of Dr. Joyce Epstein of John Hopkins University shows that a key element of that partnership is shared decision making. The National PTA, in coordination with Dr. Epstein, created the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships. The Michigan PTA supports and encourages our units and members to use these standards in their local buildings, and we would be happy to share a copy of these standards with each of you.

For this discussion, the important factor from these standards is that families should be full partners in decisions that affect their children. In Michigan, part of the way we accomplish shared decision making is through the local election of school boards. Local control of our schools shows parents that their voices matter in the education of their children and provide for more direct accountability. Under this Act, that accountability disappears.

Efforts currently underway in this Legislature place the EAA outside of local control and outside the control of the State Board of Education and the State Superintendent. How are we to achieve shared decision making and meaningful partnerships in the education of our children if we have no voice in selecting school leadership and no mechanism by which to hold school leaders accountable? Is the Governor's office going to begin fielding all parent concerns regarding the EAA? Who's listening to families and communities and ensuring they play a role in their children's education?

While we have many broad concerns with this bill, I want to focus on a few specifics.

The bill allows the EAA to establish nonprofit corporations to achieve its goals. Non-profits are not subject to the Open Meetings Act. That provision suggests that legislators who support this bill don't want parents to be involved in the education process at all. Let me be exceedingly clear: decisions about our children's education should not be made behind closed doors.

This bill allows the EAA to demolish any property it owns or controls without the approval of a local unit of government. Schools are the focal points of communities, and to give an unelected entity the authority to tear down buildings it doesn't even own threatens those communities. You wouldn't want someone to have the authority to come into your neighborhood and destroy public property, and neither do the citizens you serve.

This bill also makes providing medical, optical, and dental benefits to the EAA's employees and their dependents optional. If Michigan is to attract high-quality educators, we have to make a commitment to providing them with benefits for themselves and their families. I want the best and brightest teaching Michigan's children, and they won't be if they don't have the assurance of adequate benefits. Would you take a job if you knew the benefits you need to provide for your family were optional? Michigan's citizens value our teachers more than that, and you should too.

School reform is essential – nobody disagrees with that. We have to improve teaching methods, we have to take advantage of technology, and we have to find better ways to differentiate instruction for children of all learning styles and paces. But does this reform help children learn? Does it help teachers teach? Does it help parents support their child's education? Why are we talking about expanding and codifying into law an experimental education system which hasn't even had time to prove itself effective? In the 15 schools currently under the EAA, first semester report cards haven't even gone home yet. In one EAA school, leadership withheld meals as punishment for misbehavior, perhaps in violation of federal law. My point here is that the EAA is still entirely experimental and, in some highly publicized cases, exhibiting incredibly poor judgment. I'm baffled as to why some legislators think now is the right time to make the EAA permanent and give it more powers. As a parent, I don't see the necessity or wisdom in taking that step.

A commitment is a promise you stick with, no matter what. We need our legislators to make a commitment to public education and to instituting reforms that will provide transparency, accountability, and real academic progress for every student. This measure stifles transparency, removes accountability, and allows more children to become guinea pigs for untested reforms. I fail to see how this bill is a positive step for Michigan's children, and I urge you not to support its passage.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and your service to our state.